

Touring the Vineyards of Celtic Spain

Starting our journey in the pilgrimage city of Santiago de Compostela, we began the wine portion of our tour of Spain's Hidden Celtic Paradise by traveling south and then eastward along river valleys and over high sierras.



We pass fishing ports and Celtic sites, Cistercian Monasteries, bodegas and nature parks, all set against mesmerizing green landscapes of the region where they say "rain is art." In the vineyard-covered valleys of Galicia in Northwest Spain, we find five Denomination de Origin, including Rias Baixas, Ribeiro, Ribeira Sacra, Valdeorras and Monterrei.

Journeying south along the magnificent western Atlantic shore to the D.O. Rias Baixas, with its five sub-zones - Ribeira do Ulla, Val do Salnés, Soutomaior, O Rosal and Condado de Tea - we reach Albarino country, where the Albarino grape reigns supreme. Our first bodega is in Salnes: Bodega Lagar de Pintos, which produces Vizconde de Barrantes, a fragrant and refreshing dry white wine made entirely of Albarino grapes.

Though the wine is young, the Pintos family has been producing wine since 1887. Their bodega is situated in a beautifully restored stone manor house. After touring the winery we are joined by the owner Jose Pintos to taste the wines with him inside his quaint tavern.

Our second stop is Bodegas Martin Codax, whose wines have become very popular in the U.S. We enjoy tasting this Albariño, which is subtle and restrained, with a hint of wood accenting the fresh floral and melon aromas. After touring these two bodegas we made a short, unplanned stop at a small fishing village called Combarro.

What caught our attention was the large number of people gathering all over the beach. They were clam digging, which only happens at this time of year. We enjoyed a few glasses of Albariño wine on a terrace nearby and watched them in action.



Next stop is the region of D.O. Ribeiro in the province of Ourense. In Ribadavia village, we stroll through the Jewish medieval quarter, built with wine wealth and sitting in a bowl of steeply terraced hillsides cover with vineyards. We stop for a sample of Ribeiro wines: light, fresh and graceful.

The mountainous D.O. of Ribeira Sacra offers excellent red wines. Grapes are grown on tiny strips of land on terraces cut into steep slopes throughout the Sil valley. As we travel up the Sil River by catamaran, we see the densely cultivated area while weaving through the canyons. Vineyards were planted here long ago by monks at monasteries built in spectacular sites above the river. Hence the name Ribeira Sacra (Sacred River-bank). The most popular wine from the region are Mencia intense, dry, fruity, cherry red in color and full-bodied.

Galicia's youngest D.O. is Monterrei, which lies close to the Portuguese border. Its gently slopping vineyards are covered with wines growing low to the ground. Many grape varieties are grown here, including Godello, Dona Blanca, Mencia and Tinta Fina. Monterrei wines are not yet well known outside the immediate region.

East of Monterrei lies the D.O. Valdeorras, whose hillsides blaze yellow and purple in summer with gorse and heather. Its Godello white wines are straw gold and nicely perfumed. Well-balanced light red wines are produced here from the Mencia grape.



Crossing from the province of Ourense east into the neighboring province of Leon, we visit the D.O. El Bierzo, where wines produced from the Mencia grape variety have created much enthusiasm among wine experts and consumers.

We make a special visit to a private palace bodega by the name of Palacio de Arganza, established in 1805. This bodega combines the best of traditional wine making with modern methods to make high-quality wines. We were delighted to be invited by owner Don Daniel Vuelta to dine in the bodega's elegant dining room next to the cellar. Delicious regional cuisine accompanied by the wide selection of Palacio de Arganza wines provided a sumptuous conclusion to our tour.



Galicia Travel Tips & Notes

One of the topics of Galicia has to do with the fact that the locals like to eat and drink a lot. Once again it's not a topic, but a fact! If you go to a restaurant and order a steak and a salad don't be surprised if the waiter kindly asks you if you are ill. You are supposed to eat two or three courses and to help them "go down" with a bottle (or more) of wine.

Possibly the most well-known wines from Galicia are Ribeiro and Albariño. To my point of view Ribeiro is good, but Albariño is excellent...I was recommended the following Ribeiro "Emilio rojo" (Pretty expensive) and Albariños "Pedro de Soutomaior" and "Martin Codax".

By Sean O'Rourke (EATour Specialist)

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